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Build customer loyalty with Internet-based support

E-BIZ

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It's estimated to cost upward of five times more to win a new customer than to retain an existing one. That means companies need to build client relationships based on continuing loyalty in order to be successful.

One of the best ways to build such loyalty is to establish excellence in customer service as one of your key goals — and that's where the Internet can help.

There is major cost-saving potential in Internet-based customer service. U.S.-based Forrester Research Inc. estimates that a 5,000-employee company with $650-million (U.S.) in sales can save about 43 per cent in customer support costs and reduce support staff by almost 13 per cent through effective use of the Internet.

Those are big numbers, and they are just as accessible to small businesses as to large ones.

There are two elements to a successful Internet support initiative. Customers should be able to easily find answers to their questions on your Web site, so that they don't necessarily have to contact you. That's where you save money.

But if they are unable to get answers on their own, make sure they can quickly get direct help from you using E-mail or by traditional methods such as the telephone. That's where you provide excellence in service.

Internet-based customer support comprises several components. First, establish a "frequently asked questions" summary or FAQ section that answers the queries most commonly posed by your clients or customers. Many people who use the Internet instinctively search out this type of document when they have a problem.

To prepare your FAQ document, study the support requests that come into your organization on a regular basis. Such an analysis will probably reveal the 30 or so problems that customers need solved on a day-to-day basis.

Then detail the answers in a document and place it in a conspicuous position on your Web site. You will likely notice a reduction in support requests that come into your organization.

Also consider putting technical support documents on-line. If you sell a product, chances are that many customers who need support have lost the manual. If they find it on your Web site and solve the problem on their own, you'll reduce your direct support costs.

Make it easy for customers to contact you if they can't answer their questions on-line. Establish and highlight a section on your Web site that clearly outlines how they can get in touch with you using telephone, fax or E-mail.

Offering support by E-mail can save time and money. But if you provide this option, make sure you follow through on a timely basis.

A survey of Web sites conducted by Jupiter Communications of New York revealed that 42 per cent did not respond to E-mail questions within five days of receiving them — an unpardonable delay in this digital age where customers expect almost instantaneous support.

Don't restrict customers to the Internet — let them contact a human being when they need to. There are far too many Web sites that fail to promote good customer relationships by condemning them to automated telephone hell.

Finally, take the time to follow up the effectiveness of your Internet support activities. This includes tracking requests for help and determining whether you are satisfying customer needs fast enough, as well as soliciting feedback about how well you are doing.

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